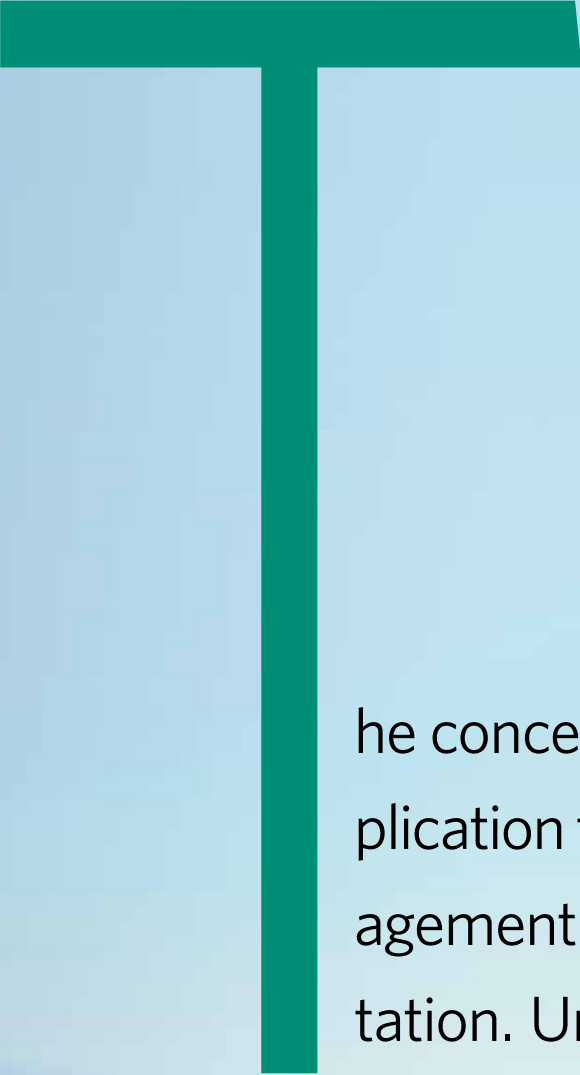


# The Power and Politics of Program Management

*Roy L. Wood*



he concept of power and its application to leadership and management has gotten a bad reputation. Unhelpful terms such as power hungry, abuse of power, and corrupted by power and a similar fixation on the dark side of power have diluted power's

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**Unhelpful phrases such as power hungry, abuse of power, and corrupted by power and a similar fixation on the dark side of power have diluted power's real use and meaning.**

real use and meaning and deprived some leaders of the opportunity to understand and use various forms of power to good purposes. This article examines what power really is, how it is acquired and expended, and why it is absolutely essential to the leader. Examples from program management will be used to illustrate throughout.

### **Power: The Motive Force of Leadership**

In his seminal book on leadership, aptly (if not imaginatively) entitled *Leadership*, Peter Northouse defines leadership as the “process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.” Influence, in this definition, is the mechanism by which leaders get things done. But how does a leader gain the ability to influence others? What, in other words, is the engine that drives influence? The answer, of course, is power.

Much as a motor requires electricity and an engine requires fuel to get work done, the leader must also have a source of power to make things happen. Like electricity and fuel, a leader's power is simply an enabler. In and of itself, power is neither good nor evil. Only the way power is used by the leader gives it moral and ethical dimensions.

### **Power Sources**

#### ***Positional Power***

The most obvious power source is based on one's position within an organization and the authority given that position. In a program office, for example, the program manager has a primary source of power based on his or her position and authority as the leader of the program team. In that capacity, the PM has authority to make decisions with regard to the program and the team, has the ability to garner and expend resources, and has access to important external stakeholders and decision makers.

The PM's organizational power may also be enhanced by the ability of the program manager to reward or punish individuals on the team through annual evaluations, bonuses, or specific task assignments. These instruments of power can provide a PM considerable ability to influence team members to work toward the goals of the program. Legitimate positional power is not dependent upon the charisma or skills of the particular individual in the position, nor is it generally dependent upon whether individual team members are personally invested in doing their tasks.

#### ***Personal Power***

The second type of power is that generated by the individual leader. One source of personal power may be what some authors call “referential power.” Such power is based on the charisma, likeability, respect, or positive feelings the leader generates among subordinates. Many program leaders are likeable folk. They are respectful, trustworthy, and fair in their dealings with others. They set a good example; and others want to follow them, learn from them, and be a part of the leader's team.

Other types of personal power are reputational and expert power. In a complex project, the PM should know more than anyone about his or her project, and thus wield considerable expert power. His decisions carry considerable weight because of the expertise the PM brings to the table. It's the proverbial “smartest fellow in the room” approach that creates significant influence over program decisions.

Over time, expert power grows into reputational power, which can expand the scope of the individual's power base. The late Rear Adm. Wayne Meyer led the Aegis combat system and shipbuilding program for 13 years. He used expert power to help make that program a success, and his reputational power as a successful leader and technical manager persisted through the remainder of his life. He was a highly valued consultant and “graybeard” across a broad array of defense acquisition topics.

#### ***Coalition Power***

The third power source is one that is gained through coalitions and interdependencies with others inside and outside the organization. Coalition power is situational, negotiated, and often temporary. It is highly dependent upon the strength of relationship and alignment of goals with key stakeholders. For example, a PM who has built a trusting relationship with her resource sponsor and shown how her efforts will result in delivering a needed capability may have built a strong power base to stave off future budget cuts.

The importance of actively building power through stakeholder coalitions cannot be overemphasized. The program leader must make a concerted effort to get to know key stakeholders, their goals and issues with the program, and

how the program manager can better align himself to them for success. The PM must realize, however, that coalitions exist around specific issues and goals—not around entire programs. While all stakeholders may be generally invested in a program's success in delivering needed battle-field equipment to the troops, each stakeholder will have particular strong interests in certain program aspects. For example, a member of Congress may be interested in how many manufacturing jobs a program will bring to his or her district. A comptroller would care about a program's actual versus planned obligation and expenditure rates. A member of the press corps might be focused on how the project will directly benefit a soldier in Afghanistan. Each of those stakeholders has different goals and agendas. The PM may or may not be able to create a relationship and show how the program goals align with the stakeholder's. If so, a coalition might be formed; if not, the relationship may not generate power.

### **Expenditure of Power**

Power has no effect until it is expended. A wise leader chooses how and when to apply just the right amount of power to influence an individual, group, or situation to move the agenda forward. If there is application of too little power, there may be no movement; application of too much, and the situation may spin out of control. How, then, does a skillful leader expend power appropriately to achieve her goals?

Application of power to achieve goals usually manifests itself in one of two ways. First, power can be used to influence decisions. Consider the question: Should the program proceed on course, or should a new technology be adopted? It may be within the PM's purview, using his positional power, to simply decide on the course of action and press the team to proceed. It may be that the new technology has strong supporters in industry and Congress. If the PM's goals were in alignment with external stakeholders, then those supporters might form an even more powerful coalition in support of the PM's decision to proceed with integration of the new technology. If the PM is opposed to changing course because it disrupts the program schedule and increases cost, he may choose to use his expert personal power to convince industry and Congress that the change would be too disruptive. The PM may also enlist the end user, resource sponsor, or comptroller—who all may have interests in staying the course—as a coalition to counterbalance industry-Congress power.

The second way power can be used is to influence others to take on tasks that help achieve goals. In the previous example, the PM may acknowledge an alignment of goals to incorporate the new technology, but argue that because of additional costs and potential schedule impacts, Congress and industry must help the PM mitigate the risks. Additional funding and favorable contract terms might be more easily negotiated by the PM from this position of power.

As noted earlier, an astute PM can use both his positional and personal power to influence the actions of the program team. Leading by example, offering rewards, or threatening punishments all can be used as power tools to accomplish goals. However, in a more subtle and counterintuitive way, the PM can often gain more power by sharing it among the team. Building an expert team, for example, and delegating authority to them to speak for the PM at their meetings can be a force-multiplier. The PM's power can thus be applied on her behalf on occasions where she cannot be present. Further, gaining team consensus before major decisions are made can also increase organizational power by aligning internal stakeholders and gaining team buy-in. Individual members who were part of the process to make a major decision are more likely to support it and work harder toward its accomplishment than they would for a decision thrust upon them.

### **Politics**

If all this smacks of politics, there is a clear connection. Except for the most elementary leadership and management tasks, there can be, and usually is, a political component to nearly every use of power. When the stakes are high and stakeholders are many, varied, and powerful, the leader must become politically savvy to avoid common traps and achieve desired goals. Again, though politics, like power, has gotten a bad name, it is a necessary skill set for a successful program manager.

Indeed, when one wields any sort of power, there exists an inherently political component. How often, for example, when simply conducting routine annual employee evaluations, have leaders or subordinates been wryly accused of engaging in politics? Further, the act of building coalitions itself is clearly political. Rather than considering politics as something to be avoided, it should be accepted as a natural component of leading. As such, it should be embraced as a valuable skill in the savvy leader's toolbox to learn and improve. As a program manager, there are an infinite number of potential political pitfalls to be aware of and actively managed. Only a few tactics will be discussed here.

### **Direct Opposition**

This is perhaps the most straightforward approach by an opponent who feels he has sufficient power to kill or cripple your effort. Opposition could come from an individual, but more likely, it is being mounted by a coalition that shares real or perceived concerns about the program. Direct opposition will normally occur early in the program's life, before it has built its own supporting power network, or later, when serious technical, cost, or schedule problems become obvious and stakeholders begin to abandon their prior support. A savvy PM would have seen either of those situations coming and worked to fix the underlying problems and build or rebuild support. Since the reasons for direct opposition are generally clear and in the open, the PM can attempt to directly address them. In severe cases, the



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PM may need to recognize a losing battle and work to gracefully end a program.

## Insurgency

Unlike direct opposition, an insurgency's underlying purpose and agenda may not be well understood. Indeed, there may be clandestine members of the opposing coalition who remain unknown for some time. The PM and her allies must work hard to uncover and address the real issues. Some insurgent coalitions can be weakened or broken by working out individual issues to the satisfaction of some key stakeholders.

## Ricebowls

Single-issue stakeholders often demand attention to satisfy their concern in return for their support (or at least withdrawal of their opposition). This is particularly prevalent in oversight organizations where many feel empowered to slow or stop progress of a program until their specific needs are met. PMs who are aware of those ricebowls can attempt to address individual concerns as they arise. Unfortunately, in large oversight organizations, that can seem like a game of whack-a-mole and be an enormous time drain on a program. Assigning and empowering trusted program team members with expert power

discussions between PMs in competing programs may also reveal some means to establish a negotiated truce. If battles are allowed to continue between rival camps, both programs may ultimately lose.

## The Importance of Recognizing Power and Politics

Power and politics are inherent components of complex defense projects. Programs with large budgets, long life cycles, and powerful stakeholders are fertile fields for political intrigue and power plays. While many PMs view the use of power and politics in programs as distasteful, they are nevertheless part and parcel of the acquisition process. PMs who recognize that and learn to wield power responsibly and address political issues when they arise can be more successful in achieving their program goals.

to work known ricebowl issues can be an effective neutralizing tactic.

## Rival Camps

Acquisition is often seen as a zero-sum game. If one program gains resources, another has to lose. The situation sets up rival camps, each vying for resources at the expense of others. That may be particularly true in programs that are creating similar capabilities, perhaps in different military services. It can also happen when a new program begins to siphon off resources from an older, established program that it may ultimately be replacing. The savvy PM needs to be aware when such situations arise and enlist the assistance of his leadership and stakeholder network to help minimize friction or simply choose between competing programs. Direct

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